

CALCULABLE FIRE, a collection of poems

by

Susan Morrison Settlemyre

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Approved by

James Applewhite
Director

Examining Committee

Wm. R. R. R.

Donell G. Donnell

Robert X. Watson

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FOOTSTEPS

Worms, disinherited by burrowing rain,
Writhe on the cold sidewalk, and my footsteps
Are nothing to their frozen agony.
So, a handful of centuries is brief time
Beside my endless twenty years.
A woman, watching stars, conceived
And carried in her womb for sixty years
Philosophy. After such nourishment,
Lao-tzu could speak at birth, and gave
Himself a name, Li Erh. What was the use?
They called him by the other all his life.
I do not believe the tale--so many days
Are beyond my concept. The slow moment
Of a kiss is less cold than distant stars,
Winter's sidewalk longer than the trip
From heated house to house.

CHRISTMAS

Roused at some unseen hour of night,
I stand outside to watch my dog nose
Her way on earthly errands. Despite
Loose-legged flannel, skin drawn into rows
Of gooseflesh, despite weather, weariness,
I am awake in some other part of mind.
Air is fine as washed and polished glass,
Hangs clear, palpable against sharp-defined
Shadows. The dark my dogwoods cast
Lies plumb-straight across my lawn
Before plunging and becoming lost
In the plot of trees and darkness beyond.
Sound travels here unfelt as thought,
Clean as imagination, hovering,
Air holds it crisply caught:
I hear, far-off, marauder cries of ranging
Robber dogs (sounds my cushioned pet
Does not know how to make or answer); the brook
Makes an original song, if I may call what
Is not meant for hearing song. Clouds flock
Low and tufted over trees, matching my breath
Reflected on the wall. One star stoops too.
I stand, gathering the wraith
Of this perfection to keep me from the blue
Fuzziness of inside night. Going in,

Balanced at the door, I hesitate:
Is this what it is to live within
The crystal Christmas paperweight?

NEW YEAR'S EVE

With winter still hunched at our shoulders,
We have beaten the darkness. Men who know
The skill of plotting sky (ultimate sky, not
Our low, white winter sky) understand
Our triumph. We who sit hearth-close
Cannot be sure the darkness won't come back;
Minute gains of light do not convince.
But we have made strict observation of
The time of year. The cedar, barren because
Unrooted (though hung with false fertility), is gone,
Yellow-edged, to sit outside again, its
Branches ribboned with tinsel and
Real snow. Beside it heap the fire logs,
Fat and frosted. One by one we lay them
On the altar. Snow in the bark each time
Makes explosions of little firework stars.
Fire grows around each round of logs,
Is combed and separated, flowing up
The chimney. Below, the embers drip
Into their liquid, lambent bed;
Their shifts in shadow seem to prophesy.
But we, unskilled in omen and augury,
Cannot read the coming year.

DISORDER

The seasons are disarranged this year. Sunday,
Late in January, was auspice for lovers,
A premature spring or posthumous
Summer, too bright for coats. The only wrap
They needed, long-haired girls and laughing men,
Were arms caught at the waist. I, alone
And looking for a month more orderly,
Passed, grudging them their free embrace,
Pretending to feel a hand that summer knew.
I walked too long that day down streets whose markers
Were the driftwood surfaces of myrtle trees,
And those appropriately, correctly
Bare. But others walked and children played
Their summer games beside the winter-showing
Streets. No snow would fall, so twisted was
The pattern of every other year.

SNOW

The snow fell surreptitiously by night,
Without warning.

I woke next morning
And cursed the sky
That left the world half-draped in white
And uglier by this nudity.
There was impotence in coming so.
The power we grant to snow
Of transmuting did not have the strength
To do one measure more than show
What should be altered, given length
Of darkness to set the falling right.

Yet it was not half-craft that angered me,
Though that was wrong as well.
The easy fact that the snow fell
Was quite enough, that winter should impose
Itself insidiously
By creeping, silent snows.
I could have kept my hope for spring
Had there not been awakening
To white without the expectation
That winter should be coming,
And not one breath for preparation.
That angered me.

Strange, the silentness should seem unfair,
That I should look for noise
When weathers have so little voice
And seasons none at all.
Strange, even, that I care,
Or have the energy to curse snowfall.
It may be the little rules
That govern me are not sufficient tools
To gauge those universal laws
That ultimately make us fools,
And feeling foolish is enough of cause
To curse the air.

ICESTORM

"This looks," she said, "like war, a country bombed.
Look how limbs fall and hang disjointed
Like broken arms."

"It's beautiful," he answered,
"The world should be ^{so} crystallized by ice."

"Rain turning cold. Yes, rain can be unkind,
A travesty of beauty. Midas has
Made mockery in gilding and breaking at once.
A tree outside my window split in two
From weight of frozen rain."

"Rain is not ice.
It's not the same at all. This silvered scope,
What can it have to do with rain?" he asked.
"Rain has no delicacy, so little force.
It gives no visions like we get from ice."

"Rain is deceptive, stronger than you think,
And rain, made cruel, is the cause of this."

"No! Rain and ice are seasons separate,
And only ice has all this rigid beauty!"

But "Rain can be unkind," was all she'd say.

JET TRAIL, INTERRUPTED

The cloud trail, hieroglyph, hanging
Like a feather that the sky would bear for ever,
Tells but the half of truth, a climax stated without
Prelude or conclusion. It describes
Some time the old blue porcelain's curve--
A finger-smudge inside the ancient bowl;
Then violently it breaks its arc
And plummets down without design.
So I am left to speculate what made
The steel forsake its symmetry,
Death or a skylark's inverse flight?
Would either leave a feather so suspended?
White, serene, the cryptic emblem of a tale
Abstracted beyond character or time.

NIGHT, ALONE

Do not insist that all's the same by night;
I know the truth of that: the house, which keeps
Day-long a prim-lipped silence, now begins
Its gossiping. A corner, perfectly
Content by day, complains. The furnace throbs--
At least I hope it's that, though summertime
And fuelless. What else would beat its tin
And hollow heart? What else? Why must it be
Warm weather now, with windows up, and screens
The single guard between me and the night?
If thieves come, they must pass this door and find
Me hidden in sheets. A blanket's better shield,
But this bare weather won't permit. Will they,
In coming, make much noise, and will I hear,
Ears stopped with pillows and eyes closed against
The dark? Will screams suffice? The thieves that I
Await are not afraid of screams. They have
Long, grinning knives, and thieving is pretense:
They know that I am waiting here alone.

READING

One bunch of glass below the center of
The chandelier splits the light,
Slanted above your head. From my
Far seat I crane to catch your face
And light as well. Snaking my neck,
I see the red, tingling like wine
Gelatine. Reared back, I catch
Sea's green. But looking to see you,
There's only yellow-orange, sleazy--
Neither elegance nor green's purity.
How can I hear your poems then?

A GIRL, FOURTEEN, TO HER MIRROR

With painted eyes I try to scan
My unaccustomed face. There is
No rhythm there, excepting that
Of having the usual amount
Of features. It catches in my throat
To think I am so much my naked self
Despite these unfamiliar balms
Now spread across my face.

There was
No skill in application

But I hoped
There might be transformation...
That these perfumed vials would make
Spindly-limbed young men go mad.
But I am only still myself,
With paint streaked on my cheeks.

ROLLER SKATES

Skating down, arms out, I release myself
From my control, give me to gods of
Friction and inertia, who fling and swing me,
Guide my shoulders in dangled, puppet patterns,
Till I might as well be motionless, as well
The green-paper bird, strung to my ceiling with
A pin, being circled with every whim of wind.

RAIL WALKING

Standing in the ditch has tired my feet
(Ankles really) so I cannot walk the rail.
The track runs past the laundry, and to
The smell of starch and big hot irons, I
Balanced nearly the length of the backyard.
One foot and then the next upon the slick,
Striated band. One hand spread out and one
Arm crooked. Don't think of itches or
Assymetry--one mental wobble and you're back
To cross-ties. But you can't dismiss
As wavering a diesel screaming down,
Its light blaring in March sun. I climbed,
As if unbullied, off the rail, into the brambled
Ditch between laundry and track and would
Not move. Stood there, holding a blackberry
Wire where it had no barbs and watched
The axles tumble past below refrigerators and
Hobbled truck-trailers. (Each wheel-set makes
A different sound.) I thought to threaten me
They might roll off, fall, and grind my bones,
Roll me back to dust. But the caboose
Swung by. I waved, remounted my track.
But feet are fit now for no more than cross-
Tie, tripping steps, although the rail is not
Hot, as I thought. Starch and heated irons

Fill with smell the vacuum left by
Violent motion. Before the train is gone
From sight, it is no more heard than clocks.

THE OWLS

I

One summer long, a colony of owls
Took residence in the borderstrip
Between our thoroughly domestic yard
(Rose garden, clothesline, and the pen
For dogs) and the forest behind.
Early evenings we could see them,
Dark knots on the limbs of skinny trees.
My father, knowing something of wildness,
Used to sit in a thin green chair
Under house eaves and watch them
Every night. He knew the parent from
The brood--I wonder if he recognized
Each separate, throaty trill.

II

We live among the living--midnight howls
Of seven dogs, rose petals on the lip
Of every shelf. My mother finds it hard
To keep us clean and human when
The forest and my father have combined
To resist, unknowing. Summers free him
(Father) to ignore her civilized pleas.
My mother assumes new mildness,
For a taunting in summer air

Makes her forget to fret. I watch them
After supper, smoking, seeing evening come,
Speaking softly, as if they found it wise
To celebrate the season by keeping still.

RAINY SATURDAY

In rain I watch how unobtrusively
Light shifts across mother-of-pearl clouds.
Each ripe, wet drop through my window
Is a silvered globe, too small
For seeing fortunes, except its own.
The glass teases me with mine.
Behind me, sunning herself in lamplight,
My dog is curled asleep, deliberately,
Against your uncomplaining knee.
Hedonist! She knows the place is mine,
That soon you will stir to stir away
Her motley, shredding silkiness,
And so she wrings the moment of all
Pleasure. Soon too I will be drawn
Into the hearth-like warmth of rooms
Sheltered against the pulse of rain.
Coffee chortling to be drunk, the sketch
I half-began of you, the kisses
You keep in waiting will call me back.
Now I am teased by fortunes in the glass.

SUMMER EMPLOYMENT

My office is hidden where
Even right ones, lacking proper charms,
Can never find the way.
Three narrow roads, writhing far
Into countryside like explorer worms,
Straggle, pine-margined, among
Tarpaper shacks that play
At being stores, houses pink-painted
And unpainted, with Christmas lights strung
At night around the rims.
The use of certain arcane spells
Will bring those right ones past a bend
To the school, deserted, renovated,
Reinhabited, to Help the Poor
Whose homes
And church surround
It. Our sterile idealism fools
Only us. The inhabitants are sure
Of folly--theirs as well as ours.
The preacher knows, our Local Aide, whose desk time
Can be counted in half-hours,
Whose old teeth gleam,
Gold-bordered like expensive books.
He knows, trapped by swivel chairs,
Intimidated by

Inarticulate memoranda

From which he unceasing seeks
Escape. Beside his tiny fears
Stalk northern-voiced boys,
Come South to offer aid.

Stalk in and talk. Stalk out.
And I sit, chained beyond mobility,
Helping no one by my facility
To add

Ionic payrolls, configured rows
Of ought and naught.

I study my brief, constant window scene--
The chickenwire mud schoolyard
And spiky woods behind, morning fog
Like smoky mirrors, light-casting, rain
(Silver, sudden storms that drag
The sky and then disperse each afternoon,
Clear as a last-spoken-word).

So, I watch sky before I trace
Home the unbridled roads
So hidden even the right one
(No more than one) without charms and guides
Can never find the ways.

ENCOUNTER: PROTEUS

I saw the ocean at late age,
Past twenty years, already
Acclimated to harder cliffs
And valleys. I stood, feet clinging to
Grey sand, and watched, believing in
The promise each undulance made
Of being last, of spreading past feet
And sand and not withdrawing, of
Revealing and emptying. I have
The fault of seeking final things,
And knowing height and hills, I could
Not drift with changing depths. But now,
Having seen the waves and images
Upon them, I am bound to answer
Shell-sibilance and tag with tide.

MARY CATHERINE AT THE BEACH

Little one, wave-racing, cart-wheeling on

Your own, discovered shore,

Smashing jellyfish at dawn

And calling me to view the mucous, dark remains,

Can it be true that you

Will be child, cart-wheeler, no more,

That you will tie your blouse with pains

Before hand-standing,

If you hand-stand at all?

^Y
Your age has grown demanding

Of a more sedate view--

No more crab-teasing in the sand,

Dancing out designs

For sake of form and style. Wet-haired and tanned,

Child-lithe yet, already, by small signs,

You begin to change

From molder of shores into

Someone grown, sculpted, and strange.

BEACH PARK

It was the children who persuaded me,
"Come on! Let's ride the cable car! We'll be
Afraid alone. Please!" And Don, "You go.
I don't like rides." And I like rides, the just-
Sufficient fright of ferris wheels, when lights
And Breughel-view of fairs offset
My flighty stomach. From the ticket-booth,
Amusement-park end of the pier, it all
Seemed safe as ferris wheels. So I agreed.
The chair would hold us all, a child
On either side, and me, centered for balance.
(I am always glad of symmetry, but why
Did the car swing so?) Even initial
Movement was sinister, a creak
And pendulous sway as we slid up the wire,
And even then our eyes were set away
From lights. Over gnashing waves our ears
Could not believe the carrousel
Calliope. We seem to fide uneasily
On telephone wires (stationed to rusty
Cruciforms); our track is limitless
And unconcerned with length; the waters stretch
And coil beneath, black, oily, unseen.
Clutching hands, we will forever sway
Down the pier, into the reaching dark.

ALCHEMY

Our year has melded into the bright, strong ring
Where end becomes beginning and a jewel
In the bezel of ocean froth. I trace
Our rhythms and unpatternings, the course
Beginning with my mountain waterfall,
Widening to winter's pool, running
Lemming-like, unwilling,
To your place, this unfamiliar surf.
Tears blend well with tide, and I am glad
They can be shed on this smooth, wet,
Transforming shore, to leave my mountains
Rivers clear, unsalted--ready,
As I am ready, to reshape our ring of days.

THE CARD PLAYER

Alone now with my solitary game,
What secrets am I laying to divine,
Slapped down within their calculated frame?
I dealt them, and the order must be mine.
Now show your mottled faces, black and red
Nobility. Of all, the heart is best,
But diamonds flaunt their brittle shield instead
To spoil my schemes and hold the rows compressed.
This is devised mortality, I grant,
A means to keep my private, unmarked score.
Compliance with my fantasy is scant;
My cards refuse, consider me no more
Ordainer, only reason-crazy fool.
My ordered deck will not accept my rule.

EN PASSANT

Friday dreams in its green park
With books and sun-clouds, and the breeze
Casting shadows of uncome presences
Across the trees. I could imagine...
But who knows what? I did not think
Of things relinquished, not
Of things lost a year ago! And today,
Watching the storm slide past,
Athwart, so slanted I can see
Its glimmering side, I would prefer
To court discovery. But there is,
In between, this Saturday net.
And there you stand, composed prey, unseeing,
Yet unchanged in the year from sight
To sight. The single, half-thrust glance
You did not even feel has tripped
The fear and flight, restrains you in
The day's thin skein, and fixes me
Upon you. But, given will to choose,
I would lose you again.

CEMETERIES

It is nearly a year since I have gone
Visiting cemeteries,
Not since I have had my own
To put there--not child
Nor lover nor any such unkin
Possession who would make
Me arch his tomb and rainbow
Tears. Because, when I was small,
My aunt would soothe my sleep
With fairy tales, and all
My fictions could not make
Her falling-off a peace,
I must not disturb her
Unconsciousness
Or mine with active grief
And must not frequent tombs.

But, if I could quite forget,
If distance were more,
I could stand as I did before
Beside shrubs hedging out
The active, most of the quick
Except gardeners and me.
The sky is always blue about
The stones. Their coarse

Irregularities

Pattern hillsides.

And they are quiet; even death

Has no more force, if not

Awakened by regret.

It would be lulled. Beyond the hedge

A factory smokestack seems

Just one more marble obelisk.

LOUISE, AFTER DR. KING'S DEATH

I never felt so much as if the world
Was coming to an end. Last Thursday night
We didn't watch the news, but we were told
By people crying something wasn't right.
I cried. And here right in my face was thrown
Again the hateful need of hating white.
Since having all my children, I have grown
Less quick. I have forgotten how to hate
And studied being poor. I should have known
Poor wasn't all we were. But now's too late
To teach me how to burn. I have too much
To lose. I learned too long ago to wait.
Like him, I guess, instead of "take", I touch.
It works--or always did before--but now
That whiteman's bullet's put an end to such
As him and me. They're breaking up the town
With bricks and sticks and guns. They've called the Guard--
"State of emergency" it's called. Sundown,
They make us go indoors, as if their word
Made seven midnight--sun just standing still
And showing that there's nothing to be feared.
I'm not afraid as yet. Just grieved and ill
And waiting, wishing we knew what to do
Next. It's been noisy some, and it's been still,
And it's been like an old-time wake all through

This curfew--silence, and the city lights
In place of candles. I just wish I knew...
There's awful mournfulness in these long nights!

A STUDY IN SILENCES

The park this fall will teach you silence, if
You need to learn. You walk in green-glass light
Of leaves that, without clamor, turn the light
To amber...because of sun and fall itself.
A few leaves float, as lazy and as slow
As dandelion fragments you once sent
Repopulating, when you only meant
To shatter with your breath their patterned globe.
(It broke in silence too.) The leaves conceal,
For they are patient of release, all shocked
And broken things last winter's icestorm left
For dead, who still can bloom. The ice was still
But where sap froze--unyielding trees were cracked
Like rifle shots, but now stoop, mutely cleft.

TO ORPHEUS

The hot and calculable little fire
Of matches is enough for me,
A bud-sized flame to light my cigarette:
A bloomless nodule, sharing little
Light. I would not be a welder,
Vining art and fire, never knowing
His flame full-face, never daring
See or comprehend. I would fear
Temptation, unrooting urge
To tear off masks and, seeing that
Blue-bright, bursting flower
(Will it burn or freeze?), lose all
My power to remember light
And to behold, through any screens, my fire.